# AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF THE SELECT WORKS OF MAMANG DAI

THESIS

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BY

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# ABSTRACT

The Northeast is one of the most ecologically rich and sensitive regions in India. Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile NEFA), is the largest as well as the greenest state of the Northeast. Geographically isolated, Arunachal Pradesh literally means "the land of dawn-lit mountains" as it gets the first rays of the rising sun in India. It is also a remote state in India because it is difficult to reach the state which is surrounded by deep forests and lofty mountains. Naturally, the literature originating from Arunachal Pradesh extensively addresses ecological issues and portrays natural elements such as rivers, mountains, forests, wildlife etc. Furthermore, it emphasizes the mutual understanding of man and nature and the life and culture of the local people. The tribes residing in Arunachal Pradesh have recognized the significant influence of nature in supporting and perpetuating their future generations. In fact, the tribal cultures are deeply rooted and intimately associated with nature as evidenced by their rituals, values, festivals, songs and dances. But different forces of development are disturbing the previously harmonious co-existence of humanity and their natural environment. Hence, writers hailing from the Northeast demonstrate keen awareness of the declining state of their natural surroundings. Mamang Dai, an inhabitant of Arunachal Pradesh and a prominent voice in Northeast literature written in English, employs a distinct approach to portray the landscape of her native state. Her works raise issues like ecological degradation, climate change, deforestation, exploitation of natural resources, besides violence and bloodshed in this region. The emergence of Ecocriticism happens as a result of the increasing awareness of environmental issues. An ecocritical study of Mamang Dai's select works not only helps to explore the diverse identity of Arunachal Pradesh but also helps to create awareness for the preservation of nature and to maintain ecological parity which are the need of the hour. Hence, the idea of exploring in

her writings the effects of the loss of ecological equilibrium seems to be a novel argument since attempts in this area have been hardly done.

The first chapter – Introduction – discussed the umbrella term ‘Ecocriticism’ with its pros and cons. The term 'Ecocriticism' was first used by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology ; An Experiment in Ecocriticism”(1978). This new field of interdisciplinary approach is defined and interpreted by different thinkers in various ways. Among them, Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell are making huge contributions to this field. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ‘Ecocriticism' in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader* as “the study of the relation between literature and physical environment” (xviii). Glotfelty espouses the adoption of an interdisciplinary framework, promoting the cultivation of collaborative endeavours among the realm of literary studies, environmental science and related disciplines. Lawrence Buell is another influential critic in the field of Ecocriticism. In his book, *The Environmental Imagination,* Buell defines ‘Ecocriticism' as a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (20). His theoretical framework revolves around the notions of “environmental imagination” and “environmental justice”. Buell also promotes the integration of literary studies, environmental science, ethics and social sciences as a means to effectively tackle environmental challenges. Three main aspects of Ecocriticism, namely Ecospirituality, Deep Ecology and Social Ecology are discussed and illustrated in the next three chapters of this research work. This chapter also discusses the review of literature. From the review of literature, it is found that there is no secondary source on the relationship between Ecocriticism and Mamang Dai. There are only some articles on this subject. Hence, there are ample scopes for researchers to do extensive research on Mamang Dai.

The second chapter – Realizing Ecospirituality through *River Poems* – deals with Ecospirituality which is a spiritual connection between human beings and nature. Preservation of environment and reverence to the divine powers through rituals are two important aspects of Ecospirituality. In Mamang Dai's collection of verses, *River Poems,* the river is not only an important element of nature but also a metaphor for life. Out of the fifty-two poems in this collection, only four poems have 'river' in their titles, yet it is the most important word in the thematic scheme of this collection. Mamang Dai enjoyed her experience on the banks of the rivers of Arunachal Pradesh and depicts this experience through her poems. In the poem "Small Towns and the River", the poet comments: "The river has a soul". This line clearly indicates the presence of Animism in Mamang Dai's poems. Here, the river is not only a living organism but also has a soul. In spite of the transience of human life, the river is a permanent entity because it knows "the immortality of water". That the river has a soul and it holds immortality in water are indicative of spirituality. According to Indian Philosophy, the body is subjected to decay and death but the soul is immutable and immortal. River – an element of nature – is nothing but an example of Ecospirituality.

The third chapter of this thesis – *The Black Hill, The Legends of Pensam* and *Escaping the Land:* From the Perspective of Deep Ecology – discusses and analyzes the Deep Ecology Movement introduced by Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher. Arne Naess coined the term "Deep Ecology" in the year 1973 to establish a clear distinction from the "Shallow Ecology". The Shallow Ecology Movement emerged as a response to the pressing issues of pollution and resource depletion, driven mainly by individuals in industrialized nations. On the other hand, "Deep Ecology goes beyond a limited piecemeal approach to environmental problems and attempts to articulate a comprehensive religious and philosophical worldview" (Sessions 65). In other words, the Shallow Ecology

Movement primarily directs its attention towards the well-being of humans within the confines of the Earth. In comparison, the Deep Ecology Movement upholds the intrinsic value of all entities inhabiting the planet Earth. Arne Naess and George Sessions endeavoured to consolidate their views on the environment by formulating a set of eight fundamental principles of Deep Ecology in the year 1984. The purpose of these eight principles is to provide a framework for enhancing comprehension of the complete ecosystem. The primary objective of this initiative is to cultivate an advanced awareness and ecological well-being. The intrinsic worth of both human and non-human life on the Earth is in their welfare and thriving fortune. In the light of Deep Ecology, three novels of Mamang Dai – *The Black Hill, The Legends of Pensam* and *Escaping the Land* – are explored. Dai's novel *The Black Hill* discusses the dynamics between indigenous people and mainstream, 'civilized' society within the context of environmental concerns and the relationship between different life-forms. Indigenous people are described as living in various natural surroundings, such as mountains, valleys, caves and forests. They are portrayed as deeply connected with nature and this association forms the core of their culture and identity. In Deep Ecology, the intrinsic value of nature is a central tenet and tribal people often serve as examples of societies that maintain a profound connection with the environment. This novel also mentions that native people often feel alienated and ignored by mainstream society. Deep Ecology emphasizes the need for a more ecocentric viewpoint where human activities are in harmony with nature rather than exploring it. All these things are illustrated by three main characters in *The Black Hill* – Gimur, Kajinsha and the French Priest. The narrative of *The Black Hill* illustrates the interrelatedness among different communities and their reliance on natural resources. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are strongly committed to safeguarding their territory and preserving their natural resources, displaying a willingness to take drastic action, if necessary. The native

communities have apprehension over the incursion of the British armed forces into their settlement. That is why they doubt the intention of the French Priest at every juncture even though all his motives are guided by purely religious principles. Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* also underscores the co-existence and mutual bonding of the different tribes living in Arunachal Pradesh. The sense of harmony is deeply ingrained in their tribal culture. This harmonious synchronization among various tribes replicates the idea of interrelatedness of Deep Ecology. The Adi tribe's belief in spirits and their relationship to the natural world are integrated into their culture. Adis believe that if spirits are angry then something terrible may happen, such as murder or death. The story of Biribik, a serpent of water, in *The Legends of Pensam*, for instance, is a cautionary tale about the consequences of not responding to these spirits. *Escaping the Land*, Mamang Dai's another novel, presents a poignant and enduring account that chronicles the experience of an individual residing in Arunachal Pradesh. The protagonist, Lutor, stands out as a unique representative since he is characterized by his ability to experience failure and then embrace and acknowledge it. The novel encompasses a blend of historical events, mythological elements and the contemporary political dynamics of Arunachal Pradesh during its journey from NEFA to the attainment of statehood and subsequent period. Mamang Dai here guides her readers to a remarkable expedition from the holy province of kojum-koja, a timeless location, to establishing a federal state within India. Maying, the narrator, has done a remarkable job by documenting the historical account of the individuals like Lipun and Lutor who have significantly influenced the development of her homeland. Moreover, the Rainman, a shaman, has profound attachment with the natural elements which enable him to decode and interpret their messages. In conclusion, it may be said that the stories of the three novels mentioned earlier unravel the relation among all life-forms including humans, animals, plants and the environment. This relationship is

central to the principles of Deep Ecology, which advocates for understanding the web of life and the consequences of disrupting it.

The fourth chapter is “Social Ecology and *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land”*. Social Ecology is an interdisciplinary field of study that aims to explore the interaction between people and their environment. First put forward by Murray Bookchin in the 1960s, Social Ecology is developed in response to the escalating crisis of the environment. According to Bookchin, environmental concerns cannot be viewed independently of social issues, especially those that are related with power relations, economic arrangements or cultural customs. As a part of Ecocriticism, Social Ecology can be considered as an outlook that can be helpful for the analysis of literary texts. Mamang Dai's non-fictional prose work is *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* is interpreted in this chapter from the point of view of Social Ecology. Dai here provides an insider's view to the story while at the same time offering historical and cultural insight into the matter. The narrative of this book is the result of an organized road trip through the regions of Arunachal Pradesh on both physical and conceptual levels. Starting with the history of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai takes her readers through the origin of different tribes and the cultural influence on them from Tibet and Burma. This work of Mamang Dai has a rich narrative that speaks about indigenous knowledge, culture-environment interface, anti-development discourse and community and local governance as a means of promoting and protecting the environment.

The last chapter of this research work is “Conclusion”. This thesis examines the literary works of Mamang Dai with a specific emphasis on the connection between the environment and the literature in Arunachal Pradesh. It surveys the unique characteristics of Arunachal Pradesh, a state that faces significant challenges in terms of social and

physical development. This work emphasizes the need for valuing, honouring and gaining knowledge from the complex fabric of Arunachal Pradesh's socio-ecological environment in order to achieve a balanced and enduring future of the state. This research work also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a harmonious equilibrium between traditional practices and actual progress, all the while ensuring the preservation of the state's rich cultural legacy and natural variety. This thesis has important implications for further research in several areas based on the findings derived from it.

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